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ABSTRACT

In an effort to test certain aspects of Oscar Lewis's "Culture of Poverty Theory" in the rural South, an investigation was made of the differences in participation patterns of the rural poor, those factors associated with participation patterns of the rural poor, and the relationship between the social participation patterns of one generation and the mobility of the next generation. Applying the Gamma measure of association, the completed interview schedules of 110 Mississippi (Kemper County) household heads (36 white and 74 black) and their adult children (218 black and 139 white) were analyzed. In the first part of the analysis, the high, moderate, and low participation scores of household heads were treated as dependent variables and age, income, education, geographic mobility potential, home tenure status, and sex as independent variables. In the second part of the analysis, the years of education of adult children and the geographic distance they had moved were treated as dependent variables, while the community participation scores of their parents constituted the independent variable. Results indicated household heads who participated most beyond the nuclear family had children who: showed greater mobility potential; were better educated; and moved greater geographic distances away from home. (JC)

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A PARTIAL TEST OF OSCAR LEWIS'S CULTURE OF POVERTY THEORY IN RURAL AMERICA

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by

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Abstract

In this study, an attempt is made to operationalize several most important assumptions of Oscar Lewis's Culture of Poverty theory and test them in a rural setting.

Introduction to the Problem

In recent years a $3,000 poverty line for families with two or more members has been extensively used by social scientists in the United States. It is to the families who are below this line that the attention of this paper is directed.

Obviously, when any definition of poverty is used, it encompasses a wide variety of individuals with regard to such variables as age, ethnicity and occupation. Nonetheless, there has been a strong tendency in American sociology to ignore differences among those living in poverty with regard to such variables as formal or informal participation patterns, level of education, and size of income. A theorist who has concerned himself with studying the differences that exist among the impoverished rather than studying their similarities is Oscar Lewis (1966).

On the one hand, Lewis holds, there are those of the impoverished who share the same values, the same designs for living that most members of society possess. They feel that they have a good chance of becoming what they want to in life. They have high educational and occupational

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aspirations and feel that they can materially improve themselves in life through trying. On the other hand, there are those of the impoverished whose values are opposite. They feel that they have little control over their destiny. They are pessimistic about life's chances and are prone to satisfy what desires they can from day to day. They have low occupational and educational aspirations and feel marginal, helpless, and dependent. According to Lewis, those of the poor whose basic values are of a negative nature differ so essentially from other Americans that they belong to a sub-culture in a society--a culture of poverty.

A crucial factor, Lewis contends, with respect to whether people in poverty belong to a culture of poverty, is their extent of social participation experience. In fact, social participation is held to be so important by Lewis that he conceives of it as determining whether people in poverty are members of a social class or not.

According to Lewis, those poor who are classless belong to a culture of poverty. Since they know little about how groups, beyond the immediate family, are organized and function, they usually fail in their efforts in society. Their aspirations and expectations have to be changed in order to cope with feelings of helplessness and despair. Thus, from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society, the classless develops negative attitudes and values. They in this way become members of a culture of poverty.

Lewis cautions, however, that the culture of poverty is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation

to generation along family lines because of its effects on the children. Only about 20 percent of the people below the poverty line in America though would be found living in a culture of poverty, speculates Lewis, and the largest sectors within this group would consist of low-income Negroes, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Southern whites.

Research Problem

When the poor are regarded as homogeneous in their social, cultural, and economic characteristics, researchers tend to place emphasis on the economic criteria to explain poverty. The central attitude that guides research is that if the poor participate less or differ culturally from the non-poor, the reason is due to income. Thus, if income changes, so then should social and cultural characteristics.

Oscar Lewis's theory of the culture of poverty encourages the researchers and policy makers to look into new avenues to fight the War on Poverty. Programs should not only be developed at the economic level, but at the social and cultural levels as well. Lewis has emphasized that the people in the culture of poverty cannot be lifted out of poverty solely through outside help. They must learn how to develop social skills on their own.

It is the thesis of Lewis that those in poverty who are inclined to participate with others gain potentialities in social mobility in comparison to those in poverty who are not similarly inclined. The present study is an effort to test this thesis by examining some of the rural impoverished in the deep south.

The main objectives of this study are:

(a) to describe the differences in participation patterns of the rural poor,

(b) to investigate those factors that are associated with the social participation pattern of these rural poor, and

(c) to investigate whether social participation patterns contribute to the mobility of the next generation.

Review of Literature

The purpose of the review of literature that follows is to gain insights into what variables are most highly associated with social participation patterns in America. Variables associated with both formal and informal participation patterns will be examined.

Sociologists, in the main, have found that Negroes participate more than do whites in formal organization when socio-economic status is controlled. (Hyman and Wright - 1958; 1971). The most relevant study, perhaps, in terms of the present research setting is one by Raymond Payne and Harold F. Kaufman (1953). These rural sociologists found in Mississippi that the lowest level of ranks, non-whites had higher participation scores than whites. Later studies by Kaufman (1966) have supported this early finding. In general, Negroes who are affiliated with formal organizations are much like whites who are affiliated. (Babchuk and Thompson, 1969).

Wright and Hyman in 1958 found that membership in voluntary associations was directly related to occupational prestige. This finding is the usual one reached by sociologists.

John C. Scott (1957), when investigating membership participation

in voluntary associations, noticed that persons in manual occupations had higher percentages of non-affiliation than those who were white collar or above. It has been noted by Reissman (1954) that manual workers and students never approached membership superiority over non-manual workers.

Income has been found to be as highly correlated with formal social participation as has occupation. Education has a comparable distinction.

Uzzell (1953), for one, has found income to be the best indicator of socio-economic status and formal membership participation. Yet participation in community associations has been found by Hazedorn and Labovitz (1968) to be predicted more by education than by any other variable which they studied. Kaufman (1949) has stated that education is perhaps the most important variable to consider when one is dealing with rural populations and social participation.

There is a tendency for participation scores to climb during the twenties and thirties, and to decline in the later years (Foskett, 1955; Taitz and Larson, 1959). In Foskett's study, the decline in mean scores set in at age 30 and reached a low at 70 years of age. Age was not found to be very important when education and income were controlled. Foskett found that those with incomes of $6,000 and above showed a continuous rise in mean scores throughout the age groups and a sharp rise in the later years.

Findings have usually indicated that formal participation is more characteristic of urban and rural non-farm residents than of rural farm residents (Wright and Hyman, 1958). However, Babchuk and Booth (1969) found that membership was equally characteristic of urban, rural farm, and rural non-farm and farm residents were within 5 percentage points

of each other. Consistently, however, in rural areas as in urban areas, it is the members of the upper class families who are the participants (Anderson and Palmbeck, 1952; Hausknecht, 1962).

Those who live in owned homes have averaged higher in the number of memberships and much higher in number in leaderships in formal organization, in both rural and urban settings, than have renters (Wright and Hyman, 1958; Mather, 1941).

Most of the factors that have been found to be highly related to formal participation patterns have also been found to be related to informal participation patterns. Aida Tomeh (1967), for example, has shown that informal participation tends to be more important for the middle and higher status persons than for lower status persons when status is defined by occupational and income criteria. Similar findings have been obtained with blacks (Munson, 1956).

Older persons have been found to be relatively low informal participants, while married persons report a high total informal participation rate (Tomeh, 1967). Smaller differences have been found to occur in informal participation when adults are classified by race, sex, religious affiliation, or length of residence (Tomeh, 1967; Babchuk and Booth, 1969).

The Data

The data of this research were collected as a part of a larger study concerned with the social and economic aspects of persons living in a rural, low-income area. This study is based on the completed schedules of 110 households in Kemper County, Mississippi. Data were obtained by use of interview schedule during the summer of 1968.

The sample selection process was essentially a simple random sampling technique based on the use of a 1964 General Highway map of Kemper County. The map was used to determine the location and the number of occupied dwellings available as sampling units. A preliminary step in the sampling procedure was the elimination of all households that fell within the boundaries of the only two incorporated towns of Scooba (population 513 in 1964) and the county seat, Dekalb (population 88 in 1964) that were within the county boundaries. The elimination of the households residing within these two towns was done to limit the sample to households residing in open-country portions of the county.

The original sample size was set at approximately 400 household units. Segments of 8 to 12 dwelling units were delineated. The segments included in the sample were drawn randomly. The time lapse between the date of the highway map and the date of the survey explains the reduction in the number of sample units actually included. That is, many housing units were found unoccupied. Factors of time and finances also contributed to the smaller number of households contained in the final sample which was drawn.

Before analysis, the original sample at the completion of data contained 234 household units. However, for analytical purposes, it was decided that only those units of which the household head earned less than $3,000 annually would be incorporated into the present study. This led to the elimination of 68 more units. Next, 10 units were eliminated because of a lack of information as to income earned per year. Finally, those families that had no children away from home were excluded with the final sample containing 110 household heads, 36 white and 74 Negro.

This research will only be concerned with the members of these 110 families who are household heads and the adult children of these household heads who live either at home or away. There are 218 adult Negro children and 139 adult white children in this study who have come from these families.

Limitations

When the household head was not present, the homemaker answered the questions that would have been asked of him. Also, the person interviewed, whether it was the homemaker or the household head, answered all questions concerning the children up to the time that the interview was conducted.

Operationalization of Variables

One section of the schedule contained a series of questions pertaining to various aspects of social participation--membership and participation in formal organizations in the community and informal participation with relatives, friends, and neighbors. Answers to these questions were weighed in such a way that a high score was indicative of a relatively high level of social participation in the community with persons other than members of one's immediate family.

Since this research involves both household heads and their adult children, the analysis of data is divided into two parts. In the first part of the analysis, the high, moderate, and low participation scores of household heads are treated as dependent variables. The factors of income, education, age, geographic mobility potential, home tenure status, and sex of household heads are treated as independent variables. In the second part of the analysis, the assumption that children will tend to be like their parents is followed. Adult children from homes where the

household heads participate more often within the community are compared with children from homes where the household heads participate less often or seldom within the community. The years of formal education of the children who have left home and the geographic distances these children have moved away from home are treated as dependent variables. With adult children, the community participation scores of their parents who are household heads are treated as the independent variable.

Age, education, income, home tenure status, geographic mobility potential, and geographic distances moved away from home were categorized in the following manner:

Age (parents)	Under sixty Over sixty
Education (parents)	Under seven years of education Over seven years of education
Education (children)	Zero through six years of education Seven through nine years of education Ten through eleven years of education High school graduate Schooling beyond high school
Geographic mobility potential (parents)	Yes or no: Would you move to another community than the one you at present live in?
Geographic distances moved from home (children)	In same community as parents In another community in county In another county In another Southern state Outside the South
Income (parents)	$ 0 - $ 999 $1,000 - $1,999 $2,000 - $2,999
Home tenure status (parents)	Owner Owner

Statistical Tests, Bivariate Analysis

The major statistical technique to be used in the analysis of the data is the Gamma measure of association. Although this statistic has not been used extensively in sociological research, it has several aspects suited to this analysis. Besides measuring the degree of association between ordinal variables, Gamma also determines direction (Freeman, 1965).

Findings

Household Head Parents

Although it was hypothesized that as the income of the household heads increased, so would their level of social participation, the relationship did not prove to be significant. When race was introduced as a control variable, it was also found that the level of income did not significantly affect the level of social participation of either white or black household heads.

Similarly, the association between levels of education and levels of participation of household heads was not found to be significant. Moreover, controlling for race (Negro and white) levels of education were not significantly related to the levels of participation of household heads.

Age of household heads was not found to be significantly associated with level of social participation. However, the relationship that did exist proved to be a negative one. With race controlled for, the inverse relationship between age and participation proved insignificant for both Negroes and whites.

The relationship between home tenure status of household heads and their levels of social participation was found significant with or without the use of race as a control factor. Moreover, the relationship between sex of household heads and their social participation patterns was not found significant with or without the use of race as a control.

Finally, the question dealing with whether household heads might someday move from the community was not significantly related to their levels of social participation. Race, when introduced as a control variable, did not significantly change this relationship.

Adult Children

Although the relationships between income, education, age, sex, home tenure status, geographic mobility potential, and social participation of household heads proved insignificant, this does not mean they are sociologically unimportant. In order to investigate whether these insignificant relationships are important, all adult children (18 years of age or over) were examined in light of the social participation scores of their parents. This was done in order to test the assumption that poverty parents who are prone to participate beyond the level of the isolated family unit influence the amounts of education their children acquire and the geographic distances these children move from home.

A positive relationship between the levels of participation of household head parents and the levels of education of their adult children proved significant beyond the .001 level of probability. Futhermore, when race was introduced as a control, the relationship remained significant beyond the .01 level for Negro children and beyond the .001 for white children (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Years of School of Children Over 18 Years Old by Race and Social Participation of Parents

Years of School of Children Over 18 Years Old	Negroes and Whites								Race: Negroes								Race: Whites							
	Level of Social Participation of the Parents								Level of Social Participation of the Parents								Level of Social Participation of the Parents							
	Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
From Zero Thru Six Years of Education	18	17	32	18	13	11	63	15	14	19	22	19	13	20	49	19	4	11	10	17	0	0	14	9
From Seven Thru Nine Years of Education	35	32	46	26	12	10	93	23	22	30	38	32	7	11	67	26	13	36	8	13	5	9	26	17
From Ten Thru Eleven Years of Education	18	17	19	10	16	13	53	13	16	22	16	13	11	16	43	17	2	6	3	5	5	9	10	7
High School Graduate	29	26	52	29	54	45	135	33	16	22	33	28	27	41	76	29	13	36	19	32	27	50	59	39
Schooling Beyond High School	9	8	30	17	25	21	64	16	5	7	10	8	8	12	23	9	4	11	20	33	17	32	41	28
Total	109	100	179	100	120	100	408	100	73	100	119	100	66	100	258	100	36	100	60	100	54	100	150	100
	4 No Information on Education								4 No Information on Education															

Gamma = .2568
Z = 4.7417
P < .001

Gamma = .1599
Z = 2.3314
P < .01

Gamma = .3296
Z = 3.5273
P < .001

The levels of social participation of parents proved to be both positively and significantly related to the geographic distances children moved away from their parents' homes. The relationship was significant at the .001 level of probability. Moreover, when white children were examined with respect to the levels of participation of their parents and the distances they had moved from home, the relationship proved to be significant at the .001 level of probability. The relationship also proved to be significant for Negro children, but only at the .05 level of probability (see Table 2).

Controlling for social participation of parents, the levels of education of children proved to be significantly and positively related to the geographic mobility of those children who had ten years of education or above. The significance of the relationship is at the .01 level of probability. However, the relationship between levels of education and geographic mobility of children, when social participation of parents was controlled, was not significant with regard to those children who had less than ten years of education (see Table3).

Conclusions

In the study at hand when impoverished, household heads who were parents were compared on their participation practices, those who participated most beyond the nuclear family unit had children (only children 18 years of age or older were considered) who showed greater mobility potential. These children are better educated and move greater geographic distances away from home.

TABLE 2

Geographic Mobility of Children Over 18 Years Old by Race and Social Participation of Parents

Place of Residence of Children	Negroes and Whites								Negroes								Whites							
	Level of Social Participation of the Parents																							
	Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
In the Same Community in Mississippi as Parents	23	21	22	12	13	11	58	17	14	19	18	15	12	18	44	17	9	25	4	7	1	2	14	9
In the Same County of Mississippi as Parents	14	13	9	5	8	6	31	8	6	8	5	4	3	5	14	6	8	22	4	7	5	9	17	11
In Another County in Mississippi	27	25	51	29	26	22	104	25	15	21	17	14	5	7	37	14	12	33	34	56	21	39	67	45
In Another State	45	41	97	54	73	61	215	50	38	52	79	67	46	70	163	63	7	20	18	30	27	50	52	35
Total	109	100	179	100	120	100	408	100	73	100	119	100	66	100	258	100	36	100	60	100	54	100	150	100
	4 No Information								4 No Information															

Gamma = .2213
Z = 3.3309
P<.001

Gamma = .1610
Z = 1.8124
P < .05

Gamma = .4491
Z = 4.3361
P < .001

TABLE 3

Geographic Mobility of Children by Childrens' Education and Social Participation of Parents

Geographic Mobility of Children	Education Levels of Children: 0-9 Years of Education — Levels of Social Participation of Parents: Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %	10 Years of Education or Above — Levels of Social Participation of Parents: Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %
In the Same Community as Parents	13	25	16	21	8	32	37	24	10	18	6	6	5	5	21	9
In the Same County in Mississippi as Parents	10	19	6	8	6	24	22	14	4	7	3	3	2	2	9	3
In Another County in Mississippi	13	25	16	21	5	20	34	22	14	25	35	35	21	22	70	28
In Another State	17	31	40	50	6	24	63	40	28	50	57	56	67	71	152	60
Total	53	100	78	100	25	100	156	100	56	100	101	100	95	100	252	100

4 No Information on Education or Geographic Mobility

Gamma = .0037
Z = .0126
P > .05

Gamma = .2859
Z = 3.0722
P < .01

Limitations

The influence that poverty has on both the value systems and social participation practices of rural adults should be more adequately studied. Longitudinal studies of poverty in rural settings are called for where both the adults in poverty and the children of these adults are examined at several points in time.

In general, the implications that can be drawn from the findings in this study are limited due to the secondary nature of the data analyzed and the small sample size. It could not be shown that the social mobility of household heads was related to their social participation practices. This is in part due to the homogeneous nature of the population sampled. For example, many of the household heads were semi-retired or retired.

Some were pensioners and others were living on Social Security. Due to the advanced ages of household heads and the fact that, for the most part, their occupational careers were behind them, the children were examined in order to determine what influence the social participation practices of household heads had on their educational and geographic mobility.

Because little has been done in examining the differences that exist in the social participation patterns among the impoverished, the informal participation patterns were not examined separately from the formal. This should be done in future studies. Also, the amounts of interaction household heads have with kin could have been studied separately from the amounts of interaction household heads have with non-relatives. Moreover, the memberships household heads have in formal organizations could have been studied separately from the local participation practices of household heads. Because the analysis is of a secondary nature, the occupations which household heads were engaged in for most of their lives could not be determined, nor could the values these heads placed on their children's successes in life.

If the adult children had been interviewed separately from the parents (household heads answered all questions concerning the family members), questions could have been asked of each of them regarding peer groups and the community influences. Questions could also have been asked of the children regarding what influence they felt their parents exerted over them.

Implications

Further research needs to be done in order to ascertain if rural impoverished parents who participate the least beyond the nuclear family unit have children that evidence the least upward mobility potential in

industrialized societies. If further research shows that rural children from such backgrounds have a paucity of formal schooling and are geographically tied to their community of origin, then in this author's opinion, enough empirical evidence can be marshalled to support a definitive examination of Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty theory in rural America.

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